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The Laotian Bonze--The Monastic Rules.

As in Ceylon, Cambodia and the other Buddhist countries, the Laotian who enters religious life does not make a perpetual vow. To become a bonze, all that is necessary is to be twenty years old, not to have killed, nor stolen, nor have any skin disease. When he is ordained, the young man agrees to observe the Buddhist rules which are: not to take life, not to steal, not to sin against virtue, not to lie, not to drink intoxicating liquors, not to eat outside of the prescribed hours, not to attend entertainments which excite the senses, not to touch gold, nor silver, etc.

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The bonze's head, chin and eyebrows are completely shaved. In principle he must shave twice a month. The garments of the bonze must not be made of one piece and their color must be yellow ochre or yellow. These two traditions have their origin in the history of the life of the Buddha. When he left the palace of his father, the Buddha cut his hair and exchanged his princely garments for those of a hunter. Now, the hunter was a poor man dressed in rags covered with the yellow ochre dust of the fields. Therefore, since that day, in memory of the first religious garments of the Buddha, tradition demands that all bonzes wear this costome. Texts are not agreed as [795] to the color, the Saddharma-smrtyupasthana sutra giving a whole list of colors for the dyeing of religious garments. We will not delay over the discussions which have arisen amongst the various Buddhist schools over [25] this problem. We will limit ourselves to stating that in central Asia and in Tibet the bonzes wear brownish-red garments instead of the beautiful yellow color of the Laotian and Cambodian togas.

Bonzes get up very early in the morning. Having made their toilet and said their prayers, they leave about seven o'clock in single file to beg for their food. To be precise, we should add that the containers for the alms are usually carried by student bonzes [bonzillons]. After returning to the pagoda they have a brief meal, then they teach [871] the student bonzes [bonzillons] to read and write, while others perform the manual tasks necessary to the upkeep of the monastery. About noon, the bonze has another meal which is the last of the day. He does not eat any food till the following morning. After the meal he [264] must wash his fingers (he eats only with his right hand), and rinse out his mouth. Then he has a siesta, and at the close of the afternoon he works at his tasks as in the morning. In principle he must never go out alone; he is always accompanied by a brother monk to protect him from any temptation.

He[1] must never look at a woman. However a few old women are seen in the pagoda. These are the devotees. They are dressed in white, their heads are completely shaved, and they lead a life of observance and asceticism which is as rigorous as that of the monks. They render small services to the bonzes, decorate the altar, etc., but they live outside the enclosure of the pagoda. 792 785 562

Laotian Buddhism.

In a recent pamphlet, His Excellency Thao Nhouy Abhay, former Minister of National Culture and Education, wrote: "In its intrinsic substance Buddhism is deeply tolerant, but ours [26] has truly become not austere enough." Therefore he proposes some necessary reforms which would quickly raise the intellectual and moral level of the bonzes in Laos. There are two sects in Laos: the Mahanikay and the Thammayut. The only difference between the two is the way in which they consider that monastic rule should be observed. Nothing distinguishes them in appearance except the color of the monastic robe of the Mahanikay, which is brownish-ochre almost chestnut. The king is the chief of the Buddhist clergy. As for the believer who regularly observes his religious duties, he is satisfied with little and gives much in alms. Buddhist tales and particularly Laotian texts, among them the Pannasajataka (Ha Sip Xat), quote all the merits acquired for future lives by those who give alms and, above all, feed the bonzes. 779 795 [792] 643 [735]

Religious Literature.

The basis of the religious literature of Laos is the Buddhist Tripitaka. These "Three Baskets" contain the integral "word of the Buddha." 779 538

The basket [corbeille] of Vinaya (Vinayapitaka) is the rule of monastic life. It consists of five sections: Patimokkha, Mahavagga, Coullavagga, Souttavibhanga and Parivara. The Patimokkha is meant to be read in public (particularly on the feasts of the eighth month), on the periodic days of confession. The Mahavagga and the Coullavagga give the list of daily obligations, illustrated by examples drawn from the life of the Buddha. The Souttavibhanga is really a commentary on the Patimokkha; finally the Parivara is both a revision and a catechism.

The Basket of the Soutta (Souttapitaka) contains an enormous amount of preaching and of edifying tales. Among others, the famous Dhammapada, a treasury of the sayings of the Buddha and the Jatakas are to be found in this basket.

[27] The third basket is that of Abhidharma and consists of seven

1 [i.e., a bonze -- Analyst]

is [Illustration here] a duty for us, to restore the Khas to the normal status to which their imposing number in the total population as well as the special qualities which they possess give them a right. 000

Once emancipated from their strict servitude and from the rapacity of the Laotian and Thai mandarins, and once commanded by leaders who have been chosen by them and from members of their own race, the Khas will rise rapidly and, as [136] time passes, will certainly give a most effective impetus to the development of our possession's riches.

Moreover, they have not lost the tradition of their original status. They are conscious of their own antiquity and say, not without scorn, that the peoples who are newcomers to Indo-China are only their younger brothers. Their race has fallen back on its own resources, has divided into small groups, has opposed a force of absolute inertia to the invader and the conqueror and has thus kept itself free for many long centuries from mixtures with other peoples. Today there are still many descendants of these first possessors of the land and one may find in them, in a latent state, the energy and courage so conspicuously absent in the conquering races which drove them back to the mountains and reduced them to a kind of slavery or ostracism from which the latter greatly profited. 563 173

Nor can it be denied that the Khas are capable of moral and material improvement. There are many, for example, who have adopted Buddhism (1), and still others Catholicism (2). These Khas have yielded up to persuasion and gentle treatment what they refused for many centuries to constraint and force. The future is therefore encouraging. 563 795 797

(1) Khouène Khas and Khmou Khas.

(2) Bahnar Khas, Rognaos, etc.

What is more, the question of emancipating the Khas has left the domain of theory and pure speculation. In 1894 M. Macey, one of our political agents, emancipated the Khas in the territories of Xieng-Khong, Muong-Mugne, Poukha, etc. The terrain was well chosen for the experiment, since this daring attempt was applied precisely to the Khouène, Khmou and Lemet Kha groups whose moral regeneration had already begun through the practice of Buddhism. 563 177

This is doubtless due to the use of the brush, which does not make it possible to draw characters as fine and as purely rounded as with a dry point, a wooden stylus, a pen or a pencil, which are the only instruments used to write the other varieties of the Thai language. 212 197

Phouthai, like Laotian, is written in characters, but these differ in number and in form. The vowels are intercalated between the consonants, or are placed like accents above the line when the consonant stands alone, or may even always be placed above in the case of some vowels. This way of understanding the use of vowels can also be found in certain primitive languages.

In the regions where Phouthai writing is used the influence of the proximity of Annam and China has clearly manifested itself, and the alphabet has become syllabic. Scholars are able to learn by heart a certain number of syllables in which consonants and vowels are joined to form a single character, but those who have not learned Laotian cannot distinguish between the vowels and consonants nor use them separately. [101]

The Phouthais, who have the same basic spoken language as the Laotians but who have a different writing and religion, must either have separated from the primitive groupings before writing was created and have attained sufficient cohesion to create their own form of writing, or else must have learned it in a perfected state of development through some foreign current. It may also be said that when the Laotians adopted the Buddhist religion they lost their old Phouthai signs and took over those of the bonzes who had come to teach them the new faith. Then the brush was abandoned for the stylus and the point, which make it possible to write more rapidly and finely and to form a greater number of signs--these being necessary, moreover, to express and define the abstract ideas and subtle dogmas of the new religion. [177 795]

[142] The Phouthai alphabet includes only twenty-three characters, almost all of which are syllabic.

The Siamese language. Of all the forms of the Thai language, Siamese, as we have seen, is the most complete and the most highly developed. Thus it will perhaps be of interest to give some notion, as rapidly as possible, of this language. 212 194

The alphabet is composed of forty-four letters which are divided into three classes, as follows:

11 letters on a rising tone, or high letters;
9 letters on a middle tone, or recto tono middle letters;

from pantheism to Christianity, passing through polytheism, anthropomorphism, Brahminism, Buddhism and metempsychosis. 771

To be sure, the most widespread religion and the one which numbers the greatest number of faithful is Ceylon Buddhism in the form of the Hinayâna doctrine, that is to say the form which adheres to the letter of the scriptures without pretending to seek or discover the esoteric meaning of the words of the master Çakya Mouni. 795 • 779

It is precisely because this doctrine abjures all casuistry, all scholasticism and all free examination that it has allowed the superstitions of Brahminism and still others to coexist alongside it. These latter are still more or less deeply entrenched, depending on the region and on whether the moral influence of the Aryans has been more or less effective and beneficent in uplifting the populace.

Since, in general, the Buddhism of the Laotians and of the Kha tribes which practice it is, by virtue of its very doctrine, exempt from all free [148] examination and from all philosophical speculation, it is a latria cult manifesting itself in ritual recitations. These latter, moreover, are incomprehensible to the faithful and even to the bonzes. To these prayers are added ceremonies and outer marks of deference for sacred places, temples, idols, worship accessories and officiants. [Illustration alongside text here.] 779

Besides this mild form of Buddhism there are still traces--often very deep ones--of Brahminism and ancestor worship, of a kind of polytheism or cult of spirits which are either beneficent genii or terrible demons, of Pythagorism, of metempsychosis, and of a curious anthropo-spiritualist belief which attributes an individual soul to each of the parts of man's body, to his moral faculties, to his food and even to his excrement, as well as to the four elements--earth, air, water and fire.

This latter belief borders closely on metempsychosis, since it also holds that all souls are immortal and subsist throughout a series of successive existences in the form of various incarnations, in the bodies of men or animals, in plants or in minerals.

It cannot be denied that this doctrine is a highly moral one. Since each mutation or incarnation is a reward or a [149] punishment, there can be no doubt but that, in combination with the precepts of sociability, respect for others and gentleness which are contained in Hinayâna Buddhism, it has had great influence on the moral evolution and social conservation of the people of Laos as well as on their moral customs.